

Countdown

by Nan Smith

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Summary: Clark, Lois and Jimmy race against time when terrorists threaten the United States with a deadly gas that can even affect Superman.

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Rated: PG

This story is the sequel to "Blind Man's Bluff", and occurs a couple of months later.

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><p>Countdown<p>

"Clark, what am I going to wear to the office?" Lois glowered at the row of neat, professional suits hanging in her closet and turned to her husband. "Nothing fits!"

He grinned at her. The last outfit into which she had squeezed herself strained across her midriff, making her rounded tummy even more prominent, and it was obvious to Lois that Clark was enjoying the sight. She supposed she couldn't blame him really, considering that up until a very short time ago the thought of her having his baby had been an impossible dream. Now, he was basking in the knowledge that she was very pregnant with their child, his first, actual physical tie with his adopted world, and loving every second of it.

"You know, honey," he said, "now might be the right time to come clean. If we do, at least Ralph won't be able to make any more cracks about your letting yourself go." He chuckled. "Not that you didn't put him in his place pretty thoroughly for his cute little joke yesterday."

"You heard that? What am I thinking, of course you heard it." She surveyed herself in the mirror. "I guess you're right, Clark. I've got to put them on sometime. Which one do you think looks the most professional?"

"Didn't you and Mom pick out some professional clothes last month when the two of you went shopping?"

"Yeah. Let's see ..."

* * *

><p>An hour later, they were approaching the entrance to the Daily Planet. They had dropped CJ off at the Little Cherubs Daycare Center and parked the Jeep in the lot up the street from their workplace, in spite of the fact that this was a typically brisk, sunny day in early December. The previous night had been graced with a fairly heavy snowstorm, which was keeping the snowplows busy this morning and causing trouble for morning commuters. Lois had been adamant about their parking spot ever since Madeline Burns had tried to blow up the Jeep in the Planet's basement parking lot, back in September.<p>

"Watch the icy spot." Clark took her arm and steered her around the patch of ice that occupied the small dip in the sidewalk in front of the main doors every winter. As if she was likely to forget that! Clark was being overprotective again, but she didn't really mind. She glanced at her husband, admiring the way that his coat fit snugly across his broad shoulders. Clark had at last discarded the dark glasses that he had been forced to wear after he'd been temporarily blinded by Mayor Burns' Kryptonite spray.

After the incident, although his eyesight had essentially recovered in slightly more than a week, it had been pointed out to him by Lois, his parents and Bernard Klein that an ordinary man's eyes wouldn't heal that fast, so they had settled on the fiction that his sight was returning to normal, but that his eyes had to be protected from bright light while the repair process was taking place.

Today was his first day sans the shades, and both of them were pleased with that, but she suspected that the thing that brought the smile to her husband's lips was the thought of his wife, in what was unabashedly a maternity dress, walking at his side. What was it, she wondered humorously, that made a man -- even a Superman -- so proud of the fact that he had made his wife pregnant? It seemed a little silly to her, but it obviously wasn't to Clark. This had to be one of the differences between the sexes that could never be quite explained. Oh well, if he was happy, who was she to argue?

They stopped, as always, so that Clark could buy a copy of the Daily Planet from the newsstand near the entrance, and proceeded on to the elevator. Clark opened the paper at once, skipping the headlines of his latest rescue and Jimmy's spectacular photos of Superman bringing

in a disabled passenger plane at Metro airport, for the inside page.

Lois punched the call button, and he quickly skimmed the relevant columns while they waited.

"Nothing yet," he reported. The elevator doors opened, revealing an empty car, and they boarded.

"Clark," Lois pointed out reasonably, "if they'd found any sign of him you'd probably know about it before just about anyone else except the cops who caught him. He's been on the run for over two months now. If he's got any sense, he's long gone from the Metropolis area. Maybe, this time, he'll retire to the South Seas, or something."

"There's always the chance that something turned up overnight," he said. "The latest statement is that they think he's still somewhere in the area."

"How would they have any idea?" Lois said. "I always wonder when the authorities make some kind of blanket statement like that. A fugitive could have a hundred ways of getting out of the city. Especially him. His organization didn't completely crumble two years ago. Sure, you found the data base, but a lot of people just disappeared and were never found."

He grimaced. "This is supposed to make me feel better? The guy's a fanatic, Lois, and the people who are following him are just as fanatical. I don't believe for a second that his arrest stopped his plans -- it just delayed them until he could get out. That escape was no amateur job."

"I know. And, of course, it had to happen while we were on vacation and you couldn't have seen well enough to stop them, anyway, even if we had been here. Well, if Steve Law does surface eventually -- "

" -- Which he will -- "

"Then we'll just have to deal with him when it happens. Just try not to get caught in any more nuclear explosions. Okay?"

He grinned ruefully. "I'll do my best. Chances are, though, that he'll try something different, since the bomb didn't work."

"Don't even think about it," Lois said. She reached up to run her fingers across his jaw. "I couldn't do without you, Clark. CJ and this baby couldn't do without their dad."

He put his arms around her. "None of you are going to have to if I have any say in the matter, honey, Steve Law and his Neo-Nazis notwithstanding."

"I'll take that as a promise," she said. He lowered his face to hers and kissed her, just as the elevator doors opened.

"Judas Priest, you two," Perry said. "That thing isn't a kissing booth, you know." Their editor was standing by the sports desk, a computer printout in his hand and a look of amused resignation on his face.

Lois led the way from the elevator without comment, removed her coat with studied casualness, and hung it neatly on the coat rack. She was conscious of a slow cessation of conversation as she turned toward her desk.

"Lois?" Perry's voice said in the sudden pool of silence. "Am I seein' things?"

She looked up with a grin to see all eyes on her. Ralph was gaping at her with a look of complete stupefaction on his face. "What's so surprising, Perry? We've been married over a year now."

"Oh, wow!" Jimmy said. "Congratulations, guys! CJ's gonna have a little brother!"

"Or maybe a sister," Clark said, mildly. "I'd kind of like a little girl, to tell you the truth. Then we'd have one of each."

Two of the women from research were staring at Lois with dropped jaws. Lois felt a small tug of satisfaction at that. These were the same two whom she had overheard in the ladies' room a couple of days ago, discussing Clark in terms that would have made her husband turn three shades of scarlet. Drool all you want, ladies, she thought smugly, he's all mine, and I'm having his baby!

Perry had come over to her desk and was looking her up and down. "I'm happy for you, honey," he said, quietly.

"Thanks, Perry," she said. "Just no sticking me on flower shows or something, okay?"

"Waste my top investigative reportin' team's talents just for something like this? Not on your life!" Perry grinned and turned to shake Clark's hand. "Congratulations to both of you, Clark. Now," he continued, suddenly all business, "I want the two of you on the follow-up to that robbery at Morris Chemicals yesterday morning. Do the police have any suspects?"

"Not as of last night," Lois said. "I'm going to try to get hold of my contact and see if anything else has turned up since."

"Okay, then let's snap to it, people!" Perry said to the newsroom at large. "We've got a paper to get out!"

* * *

><p>A couple of hours later, as Lois and Clark were exchanging notes over their current City Council piece, which involved a part of the city budget being allocated in a way that looked suspiciously like nepotism, Lois saw Clark lift his head. He stood up abruptly. "Multi-car accident on the River Parkway."<p>

"Go. I'll cover."

Clark departed via the stairs, tugging at his tie. A moment later Lois heard a telltale sonic boom overhead and turned toward the monitors. A newscopter for LNN was approaching the parkway, where Lois could see a green van lying on its side against a gasoline tanker, which was leaking a steady stream of gasoline. Several cars

were piled up behind it in various positions and, as she watched, a red and blue streak crossed the camera's lens.

Superman swooped down onto the scene of the accident and the copter's camera followed him, focussing in on his actions as he closed off the leak. Lois found herself holding her breath as she watched her husband deal with the most urgent matters first, then saw him turn and rip the door from the van and reach in toward the victims.

* * *

><p>The first thing Clark saw when he pulled the door free was that the woman was bleeding. Broken glass projected from one arm and an artery was spraying a thin stream of blood that coated most of the seat and her companion. The position in which she lay made it inadvisable to move her, and he could hear the approaching sirens of the police cars, fire trucks, and hopefully the paramedics, but if he didn't do something this woman wasn't going to live long enough for them to get here. Carefully he reached through the doorway, placed his hand over the artery just above the cut, and applied pressure, at the same time using his super senses to check her heartbeat and breathing. Her companion was breathing as well, and didn't appear to be bleeding, so now, if the paramedics would just hurry up
...<p>

What was that smell? The scent of gasoline was heavy on the air; with any luck nothing would throw a spark and ignite this stuff before the fire trucks arrived, but there was an undertone of something else that he couldn't place.

The sirens cut off as the emergency vehicles reached the entrance of the parkway, and a few moments later he saw their flashing lights as they maneuvered past the smashed and crumpled vehicles to the site of the worst crash. Shortly afterwards, he was able to move aside, as two paramedics took efficient charge of the accident victim, and proceed on to assist other rescuers.

There was an exhilarating feeling to what he was doing, making a difference, helping people like this, he thought. In spite of the severity of the accident, no one had died, and part of that at least was due to him. With luck the people in that first van would recover as well.

When he was sure that the emergency services had the situation well in hand, he headed back toward the Daily Planet, feeling fine.

Lois looked up as the elevator doors opened and Clark came bouncing down the ramp. Things must have gone well, she thought. He was obviously in a very good mood, and the smile on his face was contagious.

"Well," she said as he arrived at her desk. "I take it things went okay?"

"Couldn't be better," he said. His hands were around her waist; Lois felt herself being swept irresistibly toward the conference room. The door closed behind them and in an instant the blinds were shut and the door locked. Clark's mouth came down on hers, and then he was kissing her passionately. It was only when she felt her clothing coming off at super speed that she began to realize that something

was terribly wrong.

* * *

><p>Out of the corner of his eye, Perry White saw Clark and Lois enter the conference room, and blinked as the blinds closed instantaneously. Something must be pretty urgent, he decided, and turned his mind to the accident as seen on the monitor. Superman had been right on the ball, as usual. Somewhere or other he must have picked up first aid training, which, considering his chosen avocation, was a good idea.<p>

The paramedic vehicles were leaving the scene now, carrying the victims of the accident, and the newsmen from LNN must have decided that the story was pretty much over, for the picture was retreating as Perry watched.

In an instant, the organized chaos of the rescue scene turned into disaster. As he watched in paralyzed shock, the paramedic van drove straight off the side of the parkway, apparently without even trying to brake. Its tumble seemed to go on forever in slow motion as it plunged a good ten feet to the landscaped grassy area beneath. The newscopter swooped down again to film the latest development in what was becoming a much bigger story than anyone had at first expected. Firemen and police swarmed down the steep embankment after the van and Perry saw rescuers begin to pry it open. More paramedics moved in swiftly to deal with the situation.

"Perry! Help me!" The near panic in Lois's voice brought him around like a shot. The conference room door was open, and Lois, her hair mussed and clothes awry, was down on her knees beside her husband, who was kneeling on the floor, his face clasped in his hands. "Something's wrong with Clark!"

"Great shades of Elvis!" Perry half-ran to the pair of them and dropped to one knee. "What happened?"

"I don't know!" Lois was trying to pull Clark's hands from his face. "He was feeling all right, and then suddenly he just grabbed his head. Clark, what's wrong?"

Clark moaned faintly. "My head is splitting!" His voice was muffled.

In the background, on the monitor, the wail of sirens punctuated his words, as more emergency vehicles converged on the site of the second accident to occur on that part of the parkway within an hour.

"Ralph!" Perry barked. "Get on over to the hospital and try to find out what happened!"

"Right away, Chief!" The man headed for the elevator as Perry turned back to his top reporting team.

Lois had succeeded in prying Clark's hands from his face and was trying to make him look at her. Clark's face was screwed up with pain, and blotches of red covered both his cheeks. He began to retch slightly. "I feel sick."

Jimmy grabbed a trashcan. "Here. What's the matter, CK?"

"Dizzy ..." He reached out a hand to grasp Jimmy's shoulder. Perry made a quick decision.

"Eduardo! Jimmy! Help Clark into my office." He glanced at Lois. "He can lie down on the couch there."

She nodded and accepted his hand to stand up, trying to smooth her hair back. "It happened so suddenly ..." She stopped. "No, when he came in he was almost ... euphoric. Then it just sort of hit him."

"Should we call the paramedics?" Jimmy asked. He and Eduardo were boosting Clark to his feet.

"Let's just get him lying down first." Perry prudently brought along the trashcan. "How're you doin' Clark?"

Clark didn't answer. He had one hand over his mouth and appeared to be manfully struggling against his stomach as the two men helped him into Perry's office. Lois bit her lip and looked at Perry. "Dr. Klein is a family friend. If you don't mind I'm going to call him."

"I think that's a good idea, honey." Perry was watching Clark thoughtfully as he wavered toward the sofa between his two coworkers. "He was out covering that accident a little while ago, wasn't he?"

"Yes." Lois picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Maybe he breathed too much of the gas fumes or something," Jimmy panted. "It looks almost like some kind of reaction to a poison, or a drug, maybe -- you know, like when we all got sprayed by the Atomic Space Rats a couple of years back."

"I don't think he ..." Lois stopped. "Hello, Dr. Klein?"

Perry frowned at his top male reporter. Clark shouldn't react to poisons, of course, or drugs, but he had been affected by those dratted rats, so he wasn't immune to everything. And the paramedic van had driven right off the side of the parkway. Coincidence?

Maybe, but Perry had been a newsman for over thirty years. He didn't like coincidences, especially coincidences like this.

From the office, came the sounds of Clark losing his breakfast. This wasn't good, that was for sure. He hoped Klein would hurry. The man must know about Clark; it seemed the most logical conclusion, considering he was apparently his doctor. Something was going on that Perry didn't understand, but he didn't like it at all.

Lois put down the phone. "Dr. Klein says he'll be right here. Thank heavens, he has a medical background. I wouldn't have called him, but -- "

"Don't worry about it, honey," Perry said. "Let's just find out what happened, okay?"

Lois nodded and turned back toward Perry's office. "Clark?"

Clark didn't reply. Perry came to the door. Clark's eyes were closed and the red patches on his face had vanished. His complexion was pale, with a faint greenish tinge. "Clark, how are you doin'?"

Still no answer. Lois sat down beside him on the couch.
"Clark?"

"Dizzy," he said, indistinctly. "My head feels ... strange."

"I've called Dr. Klein. Just lie still, Clark; he'll be here pretty soon."

* * *

><p>"Clark?" Dr. Klein's voice penetrated the fog that seemed to shroud his brain. "Can you hear me?"<p>

"Yeah."

"How are you feeling?"

"Uhh." Clark forced his eyes open. His head was pounding. "Like somebody hit me with an asteroid."

"I'm not surprised," Bernard Klein said. "Considering what I found in your system."

"What are you talking about? You drew blood on me, or something? What happened to my powers?"

Dr. Klein grinned. "Blood isn't the only body fluid I can analyze, Clark. You've been exposed to some kind of toxic substance that has somehow been engineered to affect you ... Superman. This was deliberately targeted at you. Fortunately, it wasn't lethal ... but it could have been."

"But what happened? Where did I ..."

"I was hoping you could tell me."

Clark shook his head and immediately regretted the motion. "I don't know. I was feeling fine, this morning. How'd I get here?"

"You were at that parkway accident, and Mr. White said you got sick right afterwards. Could it have been there?"

"Parkway accident?" Clark wrinkled his forehead. "Oh ... yeah. I remember ... that van. There was gasoline and a smell ... I didn't recognize it."

"Do you remember anything else?"

Clark started to shake his head again and closed his eyes as his headache suddenly intensified. "That woman was bleeding. I kept pressure on the artery until the paramedics got there, I think. I don't remember what happened after that."

Dr. Klein was nodding. "That may have been where you encountered it,

then. Go back to sleep now, Clark. If you do, you'll feel better when you wake up. You've got the mother of all hangovers, to coin a phrase. Or close enough. We'll try to fill you in later."

The last thought in his mind as he drifted back to sleep was that, if this was a hangover, he was glad that he'd never had one. At least until now.

* * *

><p>"I can give you about two minutes, Perry," William Henderson's voice said. "Make it fast."<p>

Perry glanced once more at the door of his office to verify that it was shut tight and then spoke into the phone. "Bill, I've got a question. What really happened at that accident on River Parkway, this mornin'?"

Henderson was slow in answering, which confirmed the editor's suspicion that all was not quite as the police and hospital spokespersons had stated. "What are you talking about, Perry? Traffic accidents aren't my department."

"No, but it might be your department if something else was involved," Perry drawled. "Bill, I don't want to cause you guys trouble, but I need some information. I promise not to print anything you don't want me to, but I know somethin' happened there that you didn't tell us, and so do some of my reporters. I've even got some clues about what it might have been. Now, if I don't know what not to tell, any kind of rumor could start circulating."

Silence for a long moment. "Perry, you old extortionist ... all right, but none of this goes anywhere else." Henderson's voice was grim. "Do I have your word on that?"

"Do you even need to ask?" Perry said. "Nothing gets printed without your okay."

"Good. The paramedics in that van that went off the parkway are in the hospital."

"I'm not exactly surprised at that," Perry said.

"Yeah, well, their injuries are the least of it. One's got a concussion and the other's got a broken wrist and jaw. The main reason they're there is because of what else happened to them at the scene."

"They ran into some kind of chemical poison or something, right?"

"How do you know about that?" Henderson asked.

"Kent was there. It got him, too. Got really sick here at the office. His doctor says there was some kind of toxin in his blood, but he's going to be okay."

"That's good. Kent's a good man." Henderson's voice dropped. "Yeah, they did. They were both hallucinating and out of their heads at first, then almost comatose for a while, but the latest report is

that they're coming out of it -- both with massive hangovers, though. Four of my officers were hit, too -- fortunately not as bad, but they're at Metro General for observation. The current theory is that it was some kind of toxic gas. I've had federal agents breathing down my neck all afternoon."

"Let me guess. They're afraid of some kind of attack by a foreign power."

"Well ... They haven't actually said so."

"They don't need to. And you people don't want a panic, right?"

"That's pretty much it."

Perry was silent for a moment, thinking. "How about the van that crashed? Has that been checked over for signs of this stuff?"

Henderson gave a short laugh. "Are you sure you're not psychic, Perry? The van's disappeared. A tow truck showed up to take it in and never arrived with it."

Perry whistled, softly. "How about the crash victims?"

"They're both dead. Massive circulatory collapse, brought on by a lethal dose of the toxin. The only thing we can figure is that the source was right there in the vehicle with them."

"Makes sense," Perry said. "Okay, Bill, I'll do what I can to squelch any speculation around here, and I'll see that nothin' gets into the paper about it. I think it might be smart to pass this on to Lane and Kent, though -- with your permission. You know Lois -- it was her husband that got sick. If she doesn't have the facts she's gonna start diggin' and she might find this stuff out by herself ... and then you can kiss any hope of keeping it quiet goodbye."

Henderson laughed dryly again. "You think you're telling me something I don't know? Fine, but swear them both to secrecy. If it gets out, my career is on the line."

"I will. It won't go any farther."

"If I didn't know that, I wouldn't be telling you this, Perry. If they have any other questions, tell them to come talk to me in person. Now, I really have to go."

After Henderson had hung up, Perry White sat looking at nothing for several minutes. The whole scenario, as hinted at by Henderson, was terrifying, but so was the thought of mass panic in a city the size of Metropolis. No, keeping it quiet, at least for now, was the only responsible thing to do, much as it went against the grain for him to realize it. But maybe Lois and Clark could track down something to defuse the whole situation. They did, after all, have resources that other journalists didn't have. For about the millionth time after he had come to the realization a little under a year ago, Perry thanked Providence that Clark Kent had chosen to apply for a job at the Daily Planet, and that he, Perry, had noted the chemistry between Lane and Kent and partnered them up. The result had been more than anyone

could have predicted at the time, and the hottest team in town had been proving the wisdom of his decision over and over, ever since.

Perry rose and went to the door of his office. Lois was on the phone, he noted, badgering some poor source or other for information. He'd better get things rolling.

"Lois!" he bellowed. "In my office, now!"

* * *

><p>"So, that's what Henderson told Perry," Lois said. She set her teacup down on their living room coffee table and leaned back in the armchair. Clark stirred sugar into his second cup of tea and swallowed half the cup's contents in one gulp. Lois was used to it by now; she didn't wince anymore when she saw him down the scalding liquid.<p>

"More?" she inquired. "Dr. Klein said you were supposed to drink lots of fluids to wash that stuff out of your system."

"In a minute." Clark glanced at CJ, playing happily in his playpen. "Do you think it might be a good idea to send CJ on a visit to Kansas?"

"It occurred to me," Lois admitted. "If there's the slightest chance of something happening ..."

"Yeah. I think I'll give Mom a call and ask if she and Dad can keep him for us for a few days. We can just say that we're on a tough investigation. Mom won't mind." He hesitated. "I don't suppose you ..."

"Forget it," Lois said at once. "You're no safer than I am, this time, and I'm not going to leave you to handle it alone."

He nodded. "Sorry. I had to ask." He was silent for a long moment. "Um, Lois ... I don't really remember a lot, but something happened when I got back to the Planet, didn't it? I kept having these really vivid dreams that I ... well, that I took you into the conference room and ..."

She made a face. "You did."

"Oh, my god ... I didn't hurt you, did I? Lois, I'm so sorry ..."

She reached across the table to take his hand. "You didn't do anything, Clark. You started to, but I told you to stop and you did. I felt bad too, because you looked so confused, and then you suddenly got sick ... it scared me. But the point is, you stopped when I objected."

He closed his eyes. "Thank god ... Lois, I'd never forgive myself if I ..."

"But you didn't. And you wouldn't." She squeezed his hand. "Now, I'm supposed to pamper you for the rest of the evening. Doctor's orders. So what do you want for dinner? Takeout Chinese, or shall I order out

for a pizza?"

* * *

><p>They ended up with two pizzas, most of which Clark ate. After CJ was safely in bed and they had closed up the house for the night, Clark slid into bed next to his wife and snapped off the bedside lamp. The sounds of the city beyond the closed window were muted and Lois snuggled into her husband's arm. The room was quiet and dark, but she couldn't sleep with her mind running in circles over the events of the day, and the talk with Doctor Klein that had occurred before she'd wakened Clark to take him home. She hadn't wanted to upset him this evening, but it felt wrong not to talk to him about the things that were scaring her. Finally she turned over and drew a long breath.<p>

"Clark," she said.

"Yeah, honey?"

"I know this is reaching, but I have a theory. I've been thinking about it ever since Perry told me what Henderson said."

"And?"

"What if Steve Law's group is behind this?"

"I suppose it's a possibility, but what makes you suspect them?"

"Well ..." Lois sat up.

With a sigh, Clark reached over and turned on the light.

"Look at the facts, Clark. It's got to be a pretty well organized group. Dr. Klein told me that the toxin he found in your system had been specifically engineered to target the receptors, whatever they are, on your cells as well as the ones in an ordinary human's. Whoever did it had to be working from a pretty exact blueprint of your physiology. At least that's what Dr. Klein told me. And the only place to get that, anymore, is from STAR Labs. He thinks someone accessed their computer data on Superman -- not the personal stuff; that's on his own computer, and the files are invisible -- but the main files, like the ones Eric Press got that time.

"It was probably an inside job, so somebody at STAR Labs is working with whoever these people are. Someone stole that van right out from under the collective noses of the police, too. Not to mention, I had Jimmy run a few inquiries on the people we know who might be capable of designing a poison like this, even though I didn't tell him why. Winslow Schott is working at a toy company in Gotham City. Did you know he and Miss Duffy got married? Anyway, he's accounted for. But Miranda Peterson -- remember her?"

"How could I forget?"

"Yeah. Now it might just be a coincidence, but she hasn't reported to her parole officer in almost six months, and no one can find her. And then Steve Law gets brought to Metropolis for that so-called appeal,

two months ago, and is rescued by a very professional military operation ..."

Clark held up a hand, interrupting the patented Lane babble. "Okay, I agree, it's a possibility, but it could still be some foreign government."

"Yeah, but Steve Law is just as likely and you know it."

Clark frowned, obviously mulling over what she had said. "Yeah. But if that thing this morning was a trap for me it was pretty sloppy work. They'd have no idea if it worked or not."

Lois nodded. "I know. I think that was an accident. I think they were transporting the gas and just plain had an accident. It does happen, you know. Maybe the accident caused the leak, or maybe the stuff started to leak and caused the accident. That's not important. In any case, I don't think it was planned. What does scare me, though, is that they were transporting it. That could mean that they're planning on attacks around the country. And if they get scared that someone is on to them it might make them think they have to speed up their timetable."

"Not a pleasant thought," Clark said, slowly.

"Here's something even worse," Lois said. "Dr. Klein says that he thinks the stuff you were exposed to was pretty diluted. Maybe it was just meant to be used as a demonstration of what these people can do. He told me he thinks that a couple of canisters of the straight toxin would kill half the city. Including Superman."

* * *

><p>Lois zipped CJ's little jacket tightly up and fastened the cap firmly under his chin. "Are you sure that you got everything that he needs?"<p>

Clark nodded and smiled at her. "Mom and Dad have tons of baby stuff, Lois. I took his toy dinosaur along with his other toys and his books. All they need now is CJ."

"Okay." Lois picked up the baby quilt that had been given to them by Lucy. "Make sure he's bundled up tightly, Clark. He's not invulnerable yet. I don't want him to get cold on the way."

"Honey ..."

"And be sure to tell Martha that he needs two bedtime stories before he goes to bed. He likes ..."

"Considering I read them to him almost as often as you do, I think I can pass along the information." He put an arm around her and dropped a kiss on top of her head. "He'll be safer with Mom and Dad, honey. We'll bring him back just as soon as it's safe to do so. I promise."

"I know." She bent to pick CJ up and had to swallow an unexpected lump in her throat as she hugged him, then wrapped him tightly in the quilt.

Clark took CJ from her. "I'll be back as fast as I can, honey. I'll be stopping by STAR Labs before I come into work, so make my excuses to Perry for me, would you?"

"I will." She kissed both the males in her life and watched as Clark floated out the bedroom window, CJ clasped securely in his arms, hovered for an instant, then shot upward into the predawn sky. Slowly, Lois moved around, getting ready for work. She would have been getting up in half an hour anyway, and, with everything that had happened yesterday in the forefront of her mind, she knew she wasn't going to get back to sleep. At least CJ was safe for now.

* * *

><p>When Jimmy Olsen walked into the newsroom of the Daily Planet that morning, carrying the obligatory box of doughnuts, Lois's voice was the first one he heard as he stepped off the elevator, and he nearly jumped out of his skin.<p>

"Jimmy!"

"Just a minute, Lois." Boy! Talk about getting a jump on the day! He skated down the ramp, at the risk of life and limb, and dropped the box of doughnuts on the table near the coffee machine. When Lois spoke like that it was best not to keep her waiting. Although the sobriquet of Mad Dog Lane rarely applied to her these days, there were times when flashes of the intensely driven Lois Lane of old still made an appearance. As he arrived at her desk he noted that one of the members of the hottest team in town was missing.

"How's CK this morning, Lois?" he asked. "He's okay, isn't he?"

"Clark'll be in later," Lois told him. "He had a couple of things to finish before he came in. Jimmy, I want you to do some digging. It's important."

"Sure. What do you need?"

"I need you to research every laboratory supply company in Metropolis. You're looking for any place that has started ordering a lot of lab supplies that it wasn't before, or maybe that you wouldn't expect to be getting lots of lab supplies at all. I need the information as soon as you can find it. Say a time frame of the last six to eight months for starters. Can you do it?"

Jimmy sighed. "I can try. I'm going to have to do some hacking."

"Good. Get to it."

"Sure. Uh ... could I ask why?"

Lois shook her head. "I'm doing an investigation and I need the information as fast as you can get it for me."

"Does it have anything to do with what happened to CK, yesterday?"

Lois sighed. "Jimmy, just do it, please. I don't have time to go into

it right now."

"Sure, Lois." Jimmy threw her a puzzled glance and moved to his own desk. This place was getting really strange, he reflected. First, the thing with CK yesterday, when Dr. Klein had said he thought Clark had breathed too much gasoline fumes, then they'd carted him out, barely able to walk and mumbling something about Superman. Then, a few hours later, Perry had called him into his office and told him he was going to send him to a special computer class -- for three weeks -- in some place called Mill Creek, Idaho, which Jimmy had never heard of and was so small that he couldn't even find it on a map. And then Lois had him doing those searches yesterday, and now this ...

The pattern was shaping up into something he didn't want to think about, but he'd never been able to ignore unpleasant things just because they were unpleasant. His father had taught him that, if nothing else. His mind wouldn't let it go, and the conclusions he was reaching scared him. Something dangerous was happening in Metropolis, and Perry was worried about him. Trust him to try to get Jimmy out of the danger zone. That must be why he'd heard his boss on the phone yesterday afternoon, telling Alice to pack her bags and go to visit her sister in the Midwest. And Lois and Clark were in on whatever it was, apparently trying to avert a catastrophe.

Well, James Olsen wasn't going to tuck his tail between his legs and run, either. Not when he could be of help. As his fingers raced over the computer keyboard, setting up his search program, Jimmy firmly told his instinct for self-preservation to take a hike. The first thing he had to do was talk to Lois. If he could stand up to her, what was a minor little thing like a threat to his life, after all? He hit the "enter" key, took a deep breath, deliberately stiffened the backs of his knees, walked over to Lois and prepared to stick his head in the lion's mouth.

"Um ... Lois, can we talk?"

"Huh?" Lois glanced up from her computer screen.

"I need to talk to you. In private."

Lois frowned, started to say something and apparently changed her mind. "Okay, come into the conference room."

* * *

><p>"What you smelled in the van was probably the toxin," Dr. Klein was saying. "Would you recognize it again?"<p>

"I'm sure I would," Clark said. "But I'd rather not. If I got a whiff of the pure stuff it wouldn't matter that I recognized it, would it?"

"Probably not." The scientist rubbed his head with one hand. "This is a heck of a situation, Clark."

"I know." He glanced through the window of Dr. Klein's office at the other men in white coats moving purposefully about the laboratory. "I don't have to tell you not to talk about this, right?"

Bernard Klein gave him a one-sided smile. "No. Inspector Henderson

got hold of me last night, since Clark Kent seemed to have been exposed to the toxin, but I wouldn't have, anyway. And I didn't tell him that the stuff was designed to affect you. No one needs to know that but you."

"Thanks," Clark said. He pushed his red cape back impatiently. "I feel guilty not telling people, but if it gets out and people panic we'll have another kind of disaster on our hands. We've just got to figure out a way to stop this before whoever is behind it can act."

Klein nodded. "If there's anything I can do, just ask. Do you have any idea who it is?"

Clark shrugged. "Henderson said the Feds think it might be some foreign power. Lois thinks it's Steve Law's group -- you remember the New Reich, I'm sure."

"I'll take Lois's opinion," Dr. Klein said. "She's got this completely unscientific reasoning process that turns out right more often than not. I can't explain it, but I've seen it too often to argue."

"Yeah, me too. Look, Dr. Klein, there is something you might be able to do to help me." Clark hesitated, then plunged ahead. "They know I was exposed to their weapon. They have to. But they don't know for sure if it affected me, and we can't let them find out. What kind of a defense would work against this stuff?"

"You mean the gas?" Dr. Klein looked a little surprised. "An ordinary gas mask would do the trick. The difficulty is two-fold. One breath of the concentrated stuff -- and it doesn't have to be all that concentrated -- might be too much, and the other problem is even worse. How do you distribute three hundred million gas masks to the whole country in a couple of days? It can't be done."

"I know. But ..." Clark frowned. "Look, can you make something for me that will allow me to breathe in an atmosphere of the stuff without being affected? Not a gas mask. We don't want them to realize that it does affect me. It might make them more cautious if they think they haven't any way to take me out easily. Nose filters or something?"

"Hmmm ..." Dr. Klein looked pensive. Clark recognized the expression. Dr. Klein had been presented with a problem that challenged his ingenuity, and that was something he could never resist. "I think so. Filters do clog eventually, though." Suddenly his face lit up. "I've got it. Come back around four this afternoon. I'll have something better than a filter for you then."

Clark nodded. "I'll be here. Tell me, what about your computers? Do you have any idea who might have accessed the Superman files?"

Klein shook his head regretfully. "None. Those files are classified, and only three people knew the passwords necessary to access them. I've known the others since I came to work here and I trust them implicitly."

"Is there anyone new to STAR Labs with access to the computer?"

"No one new, Clark. But someone got into it. I don't know who to trust anymore." The doctor looked unhappy. "I've deleted the files and now I have the only copies on my computer, but I'm afraid the damage is already done."

Clark patted his shoulder. "We'll think of something. Don't blame yourself." He turned toward the door. "I'll be back at four o'clock."

* * *

><p>No one, Lois thought, had ever been able to truthfully call Jimmy Olsen stupid. The young man had guessed most of the truth from the few clues at hand with uncanny accuracy. She listened in silence as he verbally laid out the scenario and wondered if she could get away with one of her notorious Lane rants. Maybe, but it wasn't going to fool him for a minute.<p>

"I'm right, aren't I?" Jimmy said. He was watching her closely. "That's what it is. Some kind of chemical attack by foreign agents or something. And you've been told to keep it quiet." He licked his lips nervously. "Okay, suppose -- hypothetically, of course -- that someone was planning an attack like that in Metropolis. Who might it be -- hypothetically?"

Lois couldn't restrain a faint grin. "Well -- hypothetically speaking -- "

"Naturally."

"Maybe a foreign country, or possibly Steve Law's New Reich. But don't talk about it."

"It's all hypothetical, remember?" Jimmy said. "Besides, I'm not crazy. If they thought someone was onto them they might panic and jump the gun. Look, Lois, I'm about as close as you've got to a computer expert. What can I do to help? Tell me what to look for and I'll find it if it can be found."

There was a knock on the conference room door and Clark's voice said, "Lois?"

"In here, Clark." Lois went to unlock the door, and Clark entered. "That was fast."

He shut the door behind him. "Dr. Klein took some time out especially for me. And Superman got me the LNN tapes. Hi, Jimmy."

"Hi, CK. Are you feeling better today?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Perry said you're leaving this evening for a computer course?"

"No, I'm not."

Clark's eyebrows rose. Lois spoke up. "Jimmy knows about the situation, Clark. He figured it out by himself, and he wants to help."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea, Jimmy," Clark said. "This is

going to be pretty dangerous."

"Yeah, I suppose it is," Jimmy agreed. "But it's no worse for me than anyone else. Everyone in Metropolis is potentially in danger. Look, CK, I know Perry and you guys are trying to protect me, but I'm a grown man, and I can be of help here. I know computers backwards and forwards. There must be something I can do."

Clark had an arrested look on his face. "Maybe there is."

"What? Just tell me and I'll do it if I can."

"STAR Labs?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded. "Look, Jimmy, Dr. Klein tells me that someone broke into their computer and accessed his files on Superman. They think it was an inside job, probably someone who's involved in this thing. It could be anyone in the lab. Is there anything you can do to help us find out who did it?"

Jimmy started to speak, stopped and frowned thoughtfully, while Lois waited, holding her breath.

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, 'maybe'?" Clark asked. "Can you?"

"Well -- " Jimmy hesitated. "There's probably nothing I can do about what's already happened, but if Dr. Klein can give me access to the STAR Labs computer, I might be able to catch the guy if he comes back. Maybe more than that."

"What do you mean?" Lois asked.

"It all depends on if he comes back. If you guys can figure out what he wanted and give him a reason to go after the files again, I've got a way to trap him."

"I'll get on the phone to Dr. Klein," Clark said. "At least he can be pretty sure Jimmy isn't his culprit." He stopped. "No, for all we know, they might be listening in on his phone calls. We better go over there in person. And remember, Jimmy, this is all on the Q.T. Officially, you don't know a thing."

"Of course," Jimmy agreed, straight-faced. "It's all hypothetical, right, Lois? Let me get a couple of things I need, CK, and I'll be ready to go."

"I'll tell Perry," Lois said. "Good luck."

* * *

><p>The videotape, Lois thought, was completely uninformative, at least to the ordinary human eye. She remembered it from the newscasts last night on TV. The green van could be seen, lying on its side on the parkway, with the bulk of the gasoline truck skewed across the asphalt beside it. Impatiently, Lois turned off the sound of the narrator's voice expressing horror about the gasoline leaking from the big vehicle and the danger of fire, and concentrated on the picture.<p>

The blur that was Superman crossed the picture and she could see his brightly colored costume as he sealed the gasoline leak, then proceeded to rip the door from the van in order to reach the occupants, but fine detail was missing. People, in complete disregard of anything resembling common sense, she thought, crowded tightly around the vehicle, trying to see what was happening and blocking any possible view of the license plate. She couldn't even tell the make of the van with the poor quality of the picture.

The paramedics arrived, and she watched the rescue, but, even after the police and other emergency vehicles made their way onto the scene, and police officers shooed the spectators away, the plate was not visible. The angle of the camera was wrong.

The second accident replayed, the 'copter zoomed in for a closer shot, and, while the second rescue was filmed, the tow truck appeared on the periphery of the scene. She shook her head. It was visible for barely an instant and was out of focus as well. Maybe Clark could make out more with his enhanced vision than she could, or maybe Jimmy could do some of his digital wizardry when he got back, but to her the videotape was a complete bust.

* * *

><p>Clark returned about two, after stopping the robbery of a jewelry store and breaking up a gang fight in Suicide Slum. Lois hung up the phone for what seemed like the hundredth time as he approached her desk.<p>

"I've been trying my usual sources, but no one has any idea what could have happened to the tow truck," she said. "Bobby Bigmouth is making inquiries, but he wasn't too hopeful. So, what's going on with Jimmy and Dr. Klein?"

Clark shrugged and grinned slightly. "When I left, he and Jimmy were talking about decoy files and embedded programs," he said, his voice low. "Dr. Klein seemed pretty excited about something, though. He told me to try to think of some way to convince the bad guys that they need to look for more information. And Jimmy wanted to know if you still carry your pager."

"I do."

"I know. I gave him the number." Clark lowered his voice further. "If they think Superman didn't respond to the gas, that might be enough to convince them that they missed something. I've been careful to be seen out and about several times today, just going about my business ..."

"Yeah, I saw you. LNN was on the scene for the jewelry store hostage situation. You were pretty conspicuous. Was it really necessary to throw those guys into trash cans like that?"

He grimaced. "Showy, huh? Yeah, I wanted to be sure it was reported."

"Believe me, it was."

"Anyway, if that doesn't work, we'll have to think of some way to

convince them there's more on the computer that they missed."

"Or," Lois said thoughtfully, "what if there were some mistakes made when the data was entered into the computer? Maybe Dr. Klein could start a rumor in the lab that the assistant who put in the information got a bunch of the values wrong and is in trouble, and they're having to correct a lot of the stuff from the master copy. That would explain why Superman is so healthy today."

"Master copy?"

"Well," Lois said, "you know. The 'master copy' that only Dr. Klein has. He could be really upset about the screw-up. You know how he babbles when he's mad. Do you think he can fake it?"

Clark looked at her in awe. "I'm married to a genius. Of course I knew that, but every now and then you bring it to my attention again. Yeah, I think he can manage it. I suspect our Dr. Klein is a lot more talented than he lets on. I think Superman should pay a quick visit to STAR Labs. The sooner we can get the rumor started, the better."

"It helps to have a devious mind," Lois said, modestly. "When you get back, you can take a look at the videotape."

"Did it show anything?"

She shook her head. "The pictures are too fuzzy. Do you think you could see more?"

"Maybe." Clark turned toward the ramp. "We'll find out right after I see Dr. Klein."

* * *

><p>Clark had been gone about twenty minutes when Perry hurried into the newsroom. "Turn on the monitors, quick!"<p>

Someone hurried to obey, and they came on in the middle of a newscaster speaking so fast that Lois had difficulty following his words.

" ... Apparent gas attack in four major cities of the United States. The releases were apparently simultaneous in a major department store in each city. People are down, the emergency services are unable to reach the victims due to terrified crowds fleeing the area ..."

"Oh, my god," Lois whispered.

Perry's hand descended on her shoulder. "It's started," he said.

Lois swallowed and closed her eyes, struggling to maintain a calm exterior. Clark was going to be in the middle of it. If only Dr. Klein had managed to supply him with his defense against the poison ...

She'd missed the next few words. Television cameras scanned the fleeing crowds in one of the cities. " ... New York, Los Angeles, Miami and San Francisco," the announcer was saying. "Authorities

report that Superman has just arrived in New York and is entering the contaminated area ..."

Clark was in the middle of it already. He had to be all right, she told herself. He simply had to be. He wouldn't do anything stupid.

"E-mails have been received at the headquarters of every major news organization in the country claiming responsibility for this appalling act of savagery," the newscaster continued. "The group has declined to identify itself, but has warned that this is merely a demonstration of what could happen if its unstated demands are not met ..."

Lois couldn't bear to watch. She turned to look at Perry, who was watching the screen with the grimmest expression she had ever seen. Clark had to be all right, she repeated to herself. He had to be.

* * *

><p>Lois slammed the phone down hard enough to make her hand sting. "I can't get through. The lines are jammed," she said furiously.<p>

"Lois, take it easy," Perry said. "I'm sure Clark's all right. Didn't he go over to STAR Labs a while ago? He's probably still there."

Lois bit her lip and nodded, looking away, and thus didn't see Perry's concerned expression. Clark had to be okay, she repeated to herself like a mantra. He had to be!

"Look! Superman's cleared the gas!" someone shouted. Lois turned back, to see her husband emerging from the department store with a victim under each arm. Emergency vehicles were wending their slow way through panicked people. Men in gas masks were approaching the doors of the building as Superman took off in a blast of air that blew the hat off the announcer's head.

Somehow, Clark seemed to be okay. Lois found her knees weak and sat down quite suddenly in her desk chair.

* * *

><p>The emergency continued on well into the night. Perry had reporters covering every possible source of news in the city, but, after the initial alarm, most of the conduits of information slowed to a trickle. The situation was under control, and casualties had been surprisingly low. That was the message that was being given out. It was not until Clark returned in the early hours of the morning that Lois heard the whole story.<p>

"Dr. Klein says the stuff was the diluted form again," he told her. He was stripping off his Suit and Lois winced at the fatigue and depression in his voice. "Whoever they are, they apparently were going for a demonstration of what they could do. Trying to panic people. People were hallucinating, running full-fledged nightmares with their eyes wide open. They were just lucky that our mysterious group decided to be ... merciful. I think that's how the e-mails phrased it." He laughed harshly, without humor. "That's not to say

that some people didn't die, though."

"I heard there had been some casualties," Lois said.

He nodded. "Seven people in New York, four in Miami, nine in Los Angeles and five in San Francisco." It didn't surprise Lois that he would know. And he was probably blaming himself for each and every one. "They were mostly elderly. One man died of a heart attack. Two were trampled to death by panicked people. I couldn't save them, Lois."

"Clark, it's not your fault! It's the fault of the people who did this, whoever they are."

He threw the Suit into the hamper and turned on the shower. "I know, but it doesn't help."

"I was afraid for you," Lois said. "I didn't know if Dr. Klein had gotten your filters, or whatever they are, to you in time."

"He did." Clark stepped into the shower. "You'll have to ask him what they are. He'd barely had time to hand them to me when I heard the emergency calls. He was saying something about catalytic converters, I think, but I didn't have much time to listen."

"Aren't catalytic converters what they put in cars?" Lois asked.

"Search me. He just said they were better than filters." Lois could hear the barely suppressed anger. "God, Lois, how can people do things like that to other people?"

"Clark, these people are monsters, and between us we're going to stop them. We have to." She bit her lip, knowing that the fact that he was simply standing under the water instead of taking his usual whirlwind shower was an indication of how upset he was. "I still think it's the New Reich. It fits the way they think, but the fact that you weren't affected may slow them down. They can't possibly believe that the stuff will harm you after seeing you in action tonight. They might not like to admit it, but they're scared of you."

"I guess." The water cut off suddenly. "Hand me a towel, will you?" He emerged from the shower stall a moment later, drying his hair. "I don't know, Lois. They know if I can't find them I can't do much."

"They'll have to come out eventually. They can't hide forever. Besides, maybe we can find them. I brought the videotape home, just in case you got back tonight."

"You mean this morning. The sun will be up in an hour." He walked into the bedroom and started fishing in his dresser for clean clothing. "I want to talk to Jimmy. He can probably explain what I saw. I found the gas canisters, you know. They were hooked up to little notebook computers, stashed in the ventilation systems. I need to ask Jimmy about them."

"Well, we can call him in a while. I'm going to put in the videotape."

He reached for a comb. "All right. I'll be there in a minute."

Clark appeared in the living room in less than the promised minute and the expression on his face made him look much more like Superman than Clark Kent. Clark, Lois deduced, was really angry, and to her it was a relief. That meant that he was past the stage of blaming himself and into the stage of blaming the real bad guys. Too bad for them. "Got the tape?" he asked.

"Right here." She pushed it into the VCR. "The tow truck only appears for a second and it's a bit out of focus."

She could have visualized the whole sequence independent of the television screen by this time, she thought. She'd been watching it over and over since she got home a couple of hours ago, hoping to spot something on the short few minutes of tape that she could use. All right, so waiting for Clark's help would have been more sensible. But it didn't feel right to be doing nothing when there was something like this happening.

Clark leaned forward, watching the screen with strict attention. "I can't see the license."

"No. But watch the left side of the screen. The tow truck shows there just after the paramedic van goes over the side, but it's all out of focus."

"Shhh."

The sequence unfolded again and the tow truck appeared. Clark froze the picture and picked up a pad and pencil. "I can just see a logo on the side."

"What?"

"Just a minute." His fingers began to move with blurring speed and when he had finished Lois almost laughed despite the gravity of the situation. It depicted a human toe with a pair of round, bulging, eyes and sporting a cape with an "S" on the back. The "S" wasn't the same as Superman's, which must be how they avoided legal entanglements, but the meaning was clear.

"There's a name, but I can't read it. It's too blurred even for me," he said. "Do you think you can find out which towing company has this logo?"

"Can Superman fly? You bet I can!"

He switched off the VCR. "Let's get some breakfast. We've got a busy day ahead of us."

* * *

><p>Jimmy Olsen found himself in a position that he had not been in often: advisor to Superman. The super-hero was sitting in an office chair facing him, and describing what he had discovered in each of the locations where the gas had been released, while Lois perched on the edge of Clark's desk, simply listening.<p>

Jimmy frowned, trying to visualize the situation. "Well," he said,

"my guess would be that they probably got a bunch of cheap notebook computers somewhere ... they wouldn't even have to be very good ones. All they'd really need would be a half way decent countdown clock. Their technicians most likely spliced them into the LAN system in the building and when they were ready they just sent them a signal to start the countdown. That accounts for the split-second timing."

"In other words, they were all triggered by a single computer somewhere," Superman said.

"I'd guess they were," Jimmy said. "The guy that did it wouldn't even necessarily have to be anywhere nearby. You think this is connected to the break-in at STAR Labs, Superman?"

He nodded. "Dr. Klein told you they were trying to get information on the way my body works, didn't he?"

"Yeah." Jimmy felt his eyes widen. "You mean they were trying to make a gas that would work on you, too?"

He nodded again. "Obviously they failed, but ..."

"But we can use it to catch them," Jimmy filled in. "Well, after yesterday, they just might come back. It's all over the lab that Dr. Klein's assistant, Barbara, messed up the values for the Superman files." He grinned. "Dr. Klein substituted some really good phonies and I did the rest."

"What did you do?" Superman asked.

Jimmy couldn't help feeling a bit smug. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Well, if the guy gets into the phony files, two things will happen. It'll send an e-mail to Lois's, CK's and my computers, to let us know, and it will page Lois. I didn't have a chance to tell her that last night before all that stuff cut loose, but if she gets a page from Dr. Klein's office, it's the computer telling her that the guy took the bait."

"You can do that?" Lois said, unbelievably.

"Sure. It's not hard. But it gets better." Jimmy grinned. "I figured we needed some insurance. So there's another program hidden in the files. This is a hacker's trick that I learned about. I'd never have used it, but I figured that this time it was justified, considering what these guys were doing. When he copies the files he's going to pick up a virus at the same time. When he opens it, his computer will connect to mine and open a back door so I can take it over. Once he types his computer's password in after that, we're in."

"Jimmy," Lois said, sincerely, "that was a work of genius. If you can get into their computer you can probably find out ..."

"A lot," Jimmy said, calmly. "And if Superman or somebody can follow him when he leaves STAR Labs ..."

"We might even find out where they're hiding out, if they're in Metropolis," Lois said. "Which they probably are. Villains never set up shop in Maui or Monte Carlo. It's always got to be Metropolis."

"Well, we have some other evidence beyond that, this time." Superman's rare grin flashed. "I feel a lot better about our chances now, Jimmy. Thanks."

After Superman had gone, Lois turned to Jimmy with a sketch. "Jimmy, this is the logo of that tow truck that disappeared with the green van the other day. Can you track it down for me?"

"No sweat. I'll have it for you in a few minutes."

Perry entered the room. "Monitors, somebody!"

"Not them again," Lois said.

The monitors came on to the sound of martial music. Steve Law's face looked out of the screen at them.

"The New Reich," Perry said. "This is on all the channels. Looks like you were right, Lois."

"I'm sure you all recognize me," Law said. "I'm Steve Law, the leader of the New Reich. I'm not going to try to convince you of my concern for this country. I believe, and others like me believe, that America is on the wrong track. If no one else will take steps to correct its course, then we must."

"We gave you a demonstration yesterday. Today, at the conclusion of this broadcast, there will be another one, to convince you of our seriousness, and of the inability of the authorities and of Superman to protect you. Then, we will ask the government of the United States to turn over all of its authority to the representatives of the New Reich. You will have until eleven o'clock tonight to make your decision."

"Today's demonstration will convince you of our effectiveness. This gas is of a higher potency than yesterday's. If our request is not granted by eleven o'clock tonight, the pure form will be released, with the potential of killing millions."

"We don't enjoy this, but we must convince you of our seriousness. Think it over, America. Your fate is in your hands."

* * *

><p>"Dr. Klein, will this whatsit you gave Clark protect him from the stronger stuff?" Lois's voice was low, but that subtracted nothing from its intensity. "He's depending on it."<p>

"It should," Dr. Klein said, as quietly. "They're miniature catalytic converters designed to detoxify the gas."

"I thought catalytic converters are what go into cars to handle the emissions," Lois said. She glanced out of the window of his lab for the fourth time in as many minutes, but no one seemed to be paying any attention to them. The white-coated men and women were gathered around the lab's little television in one corner, listening to the news reports coming in.

"Most people do." Dr. Klein smiled slightly. "That's a popular misconception. Catalytic converters are used for a lot of different

things, Lois, and come in all sizes. Believe me, I'm as sure as I can be that he'll be safe."

She took a deep breath and dropped into one of the padded chairs in the crowded little office. "We've got ten hours until the deadline. If we can't get a handle on this before then, I don't know what's going to happen. Superman can't stop them if he can't find them, and from what Jimmy said they've taken some precautions this time. Even if we find the places they plan to strike, we still won't have the culprits, because they'll probably be hundreds of miles away. They can just do it again and again."

"Not necessarily," Dr. Klein said. "I wondered at first why they used a diluted form of the gas for their demonstrations, but I think I may have the answer. I doubt they were very concerned about their victims. It seemed to me that the more people they could kill, the more frightened everyone would be."

"That makes sense," Lois said. "It wasn't out of the goodness of their hearts, that's for sure."

"Exactly. There must be a reason. What if they're having trouble with supplies? How well do you know your history of World War Two, Lois?"

"Well ... it wasn't my favorite subject. I know the general things, of course ..."

"Well, here's something you might not know, then. At the end of World War Two, the atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan were the only two in existence. If they hadn't ended the war, the Allies really didn't have anything to fall back on except conventional warfare methods. It wasn't exactly a bluff, but it was the next thing to it. This toxin isn't the easiest thing in the world to manufacture. My guess is that they have a limited supply of it. I doubt they're bluffing about releasing it if necessary, but my guess is that once they release the pure stuff they'll have little, if any, left. They may have only enough for one shot, and might be counting on the shock value to scare people into surrender. And they may be relying on the threat to the citizenry to keep Superman in line after they're in power, until they can find a way to kill him -- which would be much easier if they could operate openly rather than the way they have to right now. Of course it's only an educated guess, but ..."

"So, if we can find where they've planted the gas canisters and destroy the gas, then we'll have time to catch them before they can try again. Not that it's going to be easy to do that, either ..."

"That's my opinion," Bernard Klein said. "Of course, I'm only a lab geek."

Lois stood up and surprised the scientist with a kiss on the cheek. "A very smart lab geek, Dr. Klein. Clark and I are lucky to have you for a friend. Can I try to make a call?"

"Sure. Last time I tried, the lines were jammed, though."

"Thanks. I'll keep trying. I need to get hold of Jimmy."

"Sure. We're closing up the lab early today, by the way. That's the policy when we're under threat of chemical attacks."

Lois glanced at him, trying to determine whether he was joking or not, but finally decided it was part of the scientist's very unique brand of humor. Dr. Klein grinned at her and opened the door of his office. "I'll give you a little privacy. I've got some things to finish before we close up, anyhow."

Much to Lois's surprise, Jimmy answered on the fourth try. "Daily Planet."

"Jimmy? It's Lois. Do you have anything on that tow truck yet?"

"Yeah, I do. It's the Super Towing Service over on Kingston Avenue. Also, my search program came up with something. About six months ago, a place called 'Scents Unlimited' suddenly increased their orders for lab supplies to almost twice what they were receiving before. And get this. The address is on Kingston Avenue. It might not mean anything, but ..."

"It's a shot," Lois said. "I'll meet you at the Planet."

"You want me to go with you?" Jimmy sounded surprised.

"Well, yeah. I promised Clark I wouldn't go off on an investigation alone while I was pregnant. He's not here, so you're my next choice. Besides, you found this stuff, so it's only fair that you get to come along. We're just going to walk by. Nothing dangerous."

* * *

><p>"I left a note for CK on his desk," Jimmy said, as they exited the elevator on the first floor of the Planet, headed for the Jeep. "I figured it was better to let someone know where we were going. Just in case."<p>

"Good idea," Lois said. "I told you we're just going to walk by but I guess I should have left a message."

"Well, yeah. If we've found their headquarters or something, you never know what can happen." Jimmy let Lois precede him through the revolving door.

The sky was a uniform slate-grey this afternoon, and held a hint of moisture. The morning weather report had been missing, as all of the news channels were devoted to covering the latest attack by the New Reich. Superman had been very evident in helping to evacuate victims and assist rescue workers, but the effects were widespread. And there had been more deaths. The President and his advisors were in conference and numerous riots were being reported in major cities. The situation was rapidly reaching crisis point, though Jimmy didn't really think the government would surrender so easily, but that meant that the next attack at eleven tonight would be the big one. They were running out of time.

He glanced at the bumper to bumper traffic on the street as they emerged from the building. "I wondered why it took you an hour to get here. Now I know."

"Yeah." Lois didn't glance at the traffic. "Everyone's trying to get out of the city. It's even worse now than it was half an hour ago. I'm not even going to try to drive in this, or we'll still be sitting here at eleven tonight. How do you feel about walking? It'll take us a couple of hours, but at least we'll get there."

Jimmy glanced at her feet, noting for the first time that she was wearing jogging shoes. "I guess if you can, I can."

"Good. Then let's go."

They were approximately three-quarters of the way to their goal when Lois's pager began to beep. She reached impatiently into the pocket of her coat and pulled it out. A glance at the number and she drew in her breath sharply. "Jimmy, it's STAR Labs!"

"Let me see." Jimmy took the little device, aware that he was holding his breath. "It's it," he said, quietly, trying to force his voice to sound calm. "He's taken the bait."

"They're copying the files?"

"Yeah. See if you can get hold of CK. He can tell Superman."

"I'll try. Phone service is pretty iffy right now." Lois took out her cell phone and punched in a number. After a moment she shook her head. "It's ringing, but he isn't answering. Let me try something else ..."

"What?"

She didn't answer. Instead she sucked in her breath and shouted at the top of her lungs. "Help! Superman!"

"Do you think it will work?"

She was looking up into the sky. "I don't see him, do you?"

"No."

"Help, Superman!"

Still nothing. Jimmy sighed. "He must still be on the West Coast. Last I saw he was in Bakersfield, helping to evacuate people. So, now what do we do?"

"Well," Lois said, after a moment, "our hacker's going to need to take it back and load it into his computer, right? And in this traffic it's going to take time. Do you need to be at your computer when he does it?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No. But we're going to miss our chance to catch him."

Lois swore under her breath. "Well, it may not matter if you can get into the computer. Maybe we should just go on and see what we can see, and I'll keep trying to call Clark. Sooner or later he'll answer, I hope. If not, we'll just have to walk back. We should get

there well before eleven." A snowflake drifted past her nose. "Oh, great. It's starting to snow."

* * *

><p>Kingston Avenue was as full of bumper to bumper traffic as the rest of the city. The sounds of blaring horns, the shouts of frustrated drivers and frightened passengers, filled the air. People rode by on bicycles, bypassing the stalled cars. Here and there, motorcyclists zipped past even on the sidewalks, presenting a danger to the pedestrians who had apparently decided that fleeing on foot was better than staying with a vehicle that was going nowhere. And the drifting flakes were becoming thicker. Frost was starting to stick on the sidewalk and to the roofs of the cars.<p>

Lois and Jimmy stayed close to the buildings, trying to avoid the worst of the hazards. The "Super Towing Service" lot appeared to be empty of tow trucks. The vehicles might have been appropriated by persons trying to leave the city, Jimmy thought, or they might be out dealing with the numerous accidents they had seen on their way here. However, the building appeared to be empty. The occupants all seemed to have fled.

With fading hope, they approached the building for "Scents Unlimited". There was a light on in one of the rooms on the second floor. He could see that much. Lois led the way toward a side entrance and they paused in the shelter of the narrow overhang to take stock.

"What now?" Jimmy asked.

Lois glanced around. "We need to be sure, Jimmy. If this is the place, they could easily have stolen a tow truck from the Super Towing Service the other day. If it isn't, we need to get back to the Daily Planet."

"Well, I could just go to the front door and knock," Jimmy suggested. "They probably wouldn't recognize me."

As he spoke the door opened. A young man looked out at them. "Well, well," Steve Law said. "Miss Lane, I see you haven't given up your inquisitive ways. Why don't you and your friend come in?"

* * *

><p>"In here," Steve Law said. He gestured with his pistol. "Walk ahead of me."<p>

Lois followed Jimmy into a room that appeared to be an office. A woman sat behind a desk, peering intently into a computer screen. Her platinum hair was mussed and she was muttering to herself. As they entered, she looked up and Lois recognized her. Miranda Peterson had changed a good deal since she had seen her last. She looked older, and thinner. The vestiges of her former beauty remained, but that was all. No one would call her pretty, now.

"Well?" Law said. "What have we got?"

"The values are different. It's no wonder the first version didn't work," she said. "Once we get the supplies I can make the

corrections."

"That won't be long. When we're in power there will be no shortage of material." He glanced at Lois. "Your super-hero's days are numbered, Miss Lane."

"Don't count on it," Jimmy said. "There's no way the government will cave in to you and your buddies."

"You over-estimate their courage," Law said. "We will prevail. Make no mistake. The people of America don't know how to make hard choices any longer. And once we are in power we will make the decisions for them. America's short victory over my people will be past."

"The Nazi dream died over fifty years ago," Jimmy said. "You guys are just a bunch of street thugs with big ideas."

Law didn't answer. He gestured with his weapon again. "Sit over there. If you try to escape I'll simply kill you. If one of you manages to escape, I'll kill the other. Otherwise, I might let you live to witness my triumph."

Lois eyed Miranda thoughtfully as she moved over to the chairs Law had indicated. From what the woman had said, Dr. Klein had been right. They must not have the supplies they needed to make more of the toxin. The only thing was why hadn't they waited until they did?

"What happened, Miranda?" she asked suddenly. "Why are you working for these losers?"

Miranda didn't lift her eyes from the screen. Someone knocked on the door and Law said, "Come in."

A short, slender man with a thick shock of grey hair entered the room and saluted Law. "We've finished, sir. The final reports have come in. The canisters are in place and ready for your order."

"Very well." Steve Law gestured to the computer. "Take over. Start the countdown clocks."

Lois squinted at the newcomer as Miranda moved aside and he took his place in front of the computer. He looked very familiar, but she couldn't quite place him. Surely she had seen him before, and recently. He leaned forward over the computer keyboard, then grimaced and removed his glasses. Carefully, he cleaned them on a tissue and replaced them, adjusting the position in which they rested on the bridge of his nose, and suddenly Lois knew him. She had seen this man frequently around STAR Labs, though she didn't know his name, shuffling down the corridor, moving about the lab with the cart which held his cleaning supplies.

"Well," she whispered to Jimmy, "we've found our hacker, I think. That's the custodian from STAR Labs."

Jimmy looked hard at the little man and slowly nodded. "You're right. I think his name is Jake."

The grey-haired man glanced up at them, smiled pleasantly, and turned back to the computer. He touched the "enter" key then looked at Steve

Law. "It's set, sir," he said, calmly. "The timer is counting down. We have ..." He glanced at the screen. "Six hours and forty-nine minutes."

* * *

><p>"Chief?" Perry jumped at the sound of Clark Kent's voice. He swiveled his chair around to see the young man standing in the doorway of his office.<p>

"Hi, son, what are you doing here this late?" Perry asked. He glanced around the empty office. He had told everyone else to leave early. If anyone survived after eleven o'clock the Daily Planet wouldn't need to tell them the news.

"Do you know where Lois is?" Clark asked. "She's not at the house, and she doesn't answer her phone."

Perry frowned and shook his head. "No. She and Jimmy left the office about two. That was the last time I saw her."

"It's past ten now. I've been looking for her since I got in a little while ago, and the Jeep is parked down the street."

Parry glanced at his watch. "Maybe she left a message."

Clark lifted a skeptical eyebrow, but headed for his desk. Perry followed him.

The notepad on Clark's desk had been moved so it sat prominently in front of his computer. The writing was in Jimmy's almost indecipherable scrawl.

"Going with Lois to check out Super Towing Service on Kingston Ave. Back soon. Jimmy."

"Oh, great. I better get over there and find out what happened, Chief."

"Yeah. I'd hurry if I were you, son. The deadline's in ..." he glanced at his watch, " ... twenty-three minutes."

"Right." Clark headed out of the office and, less than a second after the door to the stairwell closed behind him, Perry heard a sonic boom. He returned slowly to his desk and turned up the radio.

* * *

><p>Metropolis was eerily silent, Clark thought. The colored lights that came on automatically at sunset still flashed, blurred by the dancing flakes of snow, but the city was quiet. Somewhere he could hear a dog barking, and in the alleys and streets below an occasional cat fight was audible, but the usual babble of human voices was missing.<p>

In the distance he could see the ribbons of the parkways, brilliant with the headlights of unmoving cars and the occasional red and blue flashing lights of emergency vehicles, but the streets of the city were empty.

Kingston Avenue was as quiet. Snow gleamed luminously in the light of the street lamps, undisturbed for some time now by the passage of feet and vehicles, and the tiny, glittering flakes sifted down endlessly. He scanned the buildings below him, looking for the Super Towing Service.

The lot was empty and the business was dark. He searched it with his x-ray vision, looking for signs of life, but found nothing. Another dead-end.

Where was she? He started to turn, to retrace his flight to the Daily Planet, but something made him pause. Whatever tie it was that bound him to Lois was tugging at him, telling him that she was present, and not far away. Hovering in the air, he closed his eyes to aid his concentration and listened, tuning his ears to her heartbeat, a sound that he would recognize among a thousand others.

And it was close. It was to his left, and not at ground level. He directed his x-ray vision at the building that held that heartbeat, and on the second floor he saw her.

She and Jimmy were sitting in chairs, their wrists tied to the arms. Several men and one woman moved around the room, talking in low voices. A computer sat on a desk before them, and on its screen a clock was counting down. Steve Law stood watching it, and he was smiling.

The window smashed as Superman came through it like a bullet. A few seconds later Steve Law and his assistants were tied with their own belts, and Lois and Jimmy were free. Superman moved to the computer. "Jimmy, how can we stop the countdown?"

"You'll never make it." Law's face twisted into a sneer of triumph. "The only way to stop the gas release is with that computer, and only two persons know the password. You'll never find it in time. There's six minutes left."

"If you can get me to my computer fast, Superman, I can stop it," Jimmy said.

Superman turned to him. "You can?"

He nodded. "Let's go. I'll explain it on the way."

Superman thrust Steve Law's pistol into Lois's hands. "Can you watch them until I get back?"

His wife nodded and he thought he had never seen her look so determined. "You bet I can. Go!"

* * *

><p>Perry White looked up as Superman and Jimmy Olsen burst from the stairwell door and raced over to the young photographer's desk. Jimmy flung himself into his chair and his hands flew across the keyboard. He was talking so fast Perry almost couldn't follow the words as he hurried across the newsroom toward them.<p>

"They took the bait this afternoon, but we weren't here. Law picked us up a little later. He and Miranda had already fed the information

into the computer. I even saw them type the password in, but I couldn't see what it was. But it's all in here. I'm pulling up the password files that will let me control the remote computers that trigger the release of the gas. Ah hah! There you are ..."

He fell silent, concentrating on typing in the instructions without errors. Perry glanced at his watch then looked up to meet Superman's dark eyes. He had to forcibly restrain himself from speaking, urging Jimmy to greater speed. Forty-five seconds and counting. The second hand moved inexorably toward zero as he watched, and he held his breath.

Jimmy hit the "enter" key and exhaled a huge sigh. "Done!"

Perry literally felt his knees go weak and was aware of Superman lowering him into a chair. "Mr. White?"

"I'm all right." Perry took a deep breath and gave the Man of Steel a shaky grin. "That's as close as I ever want to come to Armageddon, though."

"Me, too," Superman said. He closed his eyes briefly. "Me, too. Good work, Jimmy."

* * *

><p>"Coffee, Dr. Klein?" Lois asked.<p>

The scientist shook his head. "Never touch the stuff. If you have tea ..."

Clark grinned. "A man after my own heart. I'll get it." He stood up and headed for the kitchen.

"Superman drinks tea?" Dr. Klein asked, raising his eyebrows at Lois.

She nodded. "His mom's a tea drinker. He likes coffee, too, though, only not the way I do. He prefers a little coffee with his cream, sugar and chocolate."

Klein chuckled. "I guess he can get away with it." He glanced at his own middle. "It's all I can do to keep what waistline I have left."

Lois smiled in sympathy. "That's all right, Dr. Klein. We like you the way you are."

"So does Carolyn," Dr. Klein said. "And you've called me Dr. Klein for a long time now, Lois. How about you and Clark making it Bernie? That's what my friends call me."

"All right ... Bernie." She glanced around as Clark re-entered the room with the teapot in his hands.

"Here you go," Clark said. "Is oolong all right?"

"Fine," Dr. Klein said. He accepted a cup and stirred in half a teaspoon of sugar. "So, you were going to fill me in on how things turned out. I'm sure not everything appeared in the paper."

"True, but most of it did," Clark said. "Jimmy's the hero of the day and he's dodging paparazzi as we speak."

Klein grinned. "The price of fame."

"Yeah. Well, Jimmy found the general locations of the gas canisters listed on the computer and I tracked them down and disposed of them in space. I figured you'd want to know about that."

"I did. What did you tell the Feds?"

"Just what I told you. They weren't very happy about it, but there wasn't a lot they could do. It turns out you were right about the quantity the New Reich had on hand, by the way. They were having supply problems. Some of the ingredients for their gas were controlled substances and the DEA was after their suppliers, even though they didn't realize who they were chasing." He took a sip of his own tea. "Then the car accident precipitated things. They were afraid their operation was blown."

Dr. Klein nodded. "I see. I guess we can be grateful for small favors."

"Yeah," Clark said. "If we hadn't been warned, things could have turned out a lot worse."

"I have a question for you, Dr. Klein," Lois said. "I've been wondering about something. Why did the toxin affect Clark differently than the other victims? His symptoms were a bit different ..." She glanced at Clark, who met her eyes and grinned sheepishly.

"Huh?" Dr. Klein looked surprised. "Oh, didn't I mention that?"

"No," Lois said.

"Well, it had to do with trying to engineer it to affect a Kryptonian along with humans," Dr. Klein explained. "Clark's biology is, to put it simply, different. It hit him like a dose of cocaine hits a human. First there's a rush of well-being, euphoria ..."

"Yeah," Clark said, thoughtfully. "I was feeling pretty 'up' --"

"In more ways than one," Lois murmured softly, but apparently Dr. Klein heard, because he turned pink and all at once became very interested in his teacup.

"And then he crashed suddenly," Lois added.

"Ahem, yes," Dr. Klein said. "Again like a dose of cocaine -- only, of course, faster."

"I guess that makes sense," Clark said.

"Well, at least it explains a lot," Lois amended. "And, of course, they think it didn't work."

"Yes, but the Superman files were on the computer," Dr. Klein said.

"What about them? I find I really don't like the idea of the government having that much information about Superman."

"They don't," Clark said. "I explained that to Jimmy and he did a complete wipe of all the original Superman files. All they have are the false ones."

"Ah," Dr. Klein said. "Excellent." He grimaced. "The thought that Jake was a spy all along ..."

"Yeah," Clark said. "But it turned out that one of the Federal agents that was giving Henderson a hard time, and the custodian at MPD Headquarters, were Law's men, too, so don't feel too bad. He had men in a lot of strategic places. Jimmy was able to supply the FBI with a list of their people's names and addresses, so hopefully they'll pick up most of them."

"And the chemist? This Miranda Peterson? How did she get involved?"

Lois shook her head. "That is one messed up woman. Did you know she's still in love with Lex Luthor? She blamed Superman for his death and the Reich offered her a chance to get even. Then, when she realized how deep she was getting in, she wanted to back out and couldn't. When the police showed up at 'Scents Unlimited' she started talking her head off -- I think she was actually relieved to be caught."

Klein drained his cup. "It's too bad. The woman is brilliant. It's a shame she wasted her talents the way she did."

"Yeah, it is," Lois said, "but she chose to do it. No one forced her. Remind me to tell you about the first time we met her. She tried to dump me into a vat of boiling chemicals and turn Metropolis into a brothel."

Dr. Klein's eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"Not exactly a brothel, Lois," Clark protested mildly.

"Close enough," Lois said. "Besides, what would you call it? Remember the dance of the seven veils?"

Clark laughed. "Point taken. Would you like some more tea, Dr. Klein?"

The scientist glanced at his watch. "No, thanks. I'm meeting Carolyn in a couple of hours. We're having a celebratory dinner at Antonio's this evening. Thanks for recommending it, by the way, Clark. Carolyn loves it."

"Glad to help," Clark said.

When Dr. Klein had gone, Lois looked at her husband. "So, why are you looking worried?"

"I'm not worried."

"Clark, since when did you start thinking you can fool me?"

He smiled fractionally. "I'm not really worried. Concerned, maybe."

"About what?"

"Everything that happened in the last few days. Law and his group failed this time, but they'll keep trying. We can't possibly catch them all."

"If they do," Lois said, "then we'll be here to stop them. I don't know who said it, but somebody once said that all that's necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. As long as people like you and Jimmy -- "

" -- And you -- "

She smiled a little. "As long as someone is willing to fight back, evil can't win, at least in the long run. That only happens when people give up."

"You're saying that we can't give up, either."

"Exactly." She put her arms around his neck. "Now, what are we going to do with the two days off that Perry gave us? I believe we have a little boy waiting for us to come and get him. And your mom and dad are expecting us for dinner."

He grinned, suddenly feeling much better. "Well, let me make a small change of clothing and grab the overnight bag and we'll go. Unless you'd like to take a little time here, first ..."

The phone began to ring and they waited for the answering machine to take the call. They had been avoiding phone calls from other papers since yesterday.

"Lois," her mother's voice said, "I've been trying to get hold of you since this morning. If you get this message, I wanted to let you know that I'm coming to stay with you for the next two days. My landlord is going to be fumigating my apartment ..."

Clark moved, whipping the air inside the townhouse into a miniature hurricane; then he was standing before her clad in the Suit and holding the overnight bag, which he had fetched from upstairs. "Ready to go?"

"Absolutely." She jumped into his arms, giggling.

He felt his own lips twitch in response. "What?"

"I was just thinking. You can face down the New Reich, but when my mother threatens to come for a visit, you panic."

Clark grinned. "Honey, even Superman knows when he's met his match. Superman Express is now leaving Metropolis. Next stop: Kansas."

Lois was still giggling as they took off.

The End

End
file.